THE MAKING OF PORTUGUESE DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

I

This book is concerned with dictatorship and its legacy; with revolution and its history; and with the emergence and consolidation of democracy. It is an attempt to discuss and to explain the making of Portuguese democracy. The Portuguese revolution of 1974–76 is at the center of the transition to democracy in Portugal as it is in this book. It was an extraordinary period – unexpected, much misunderstood, dramatic in its effects on the international scene. The Portuguese upheaval was more like the European revolutions of the 1820s and 1848 than like the "great" revolutions of 1789 in France or 1917 in Russia. That is, it was startling in psychological power, yet limited in its ability to reorder society; significant enough in its impact to transform the context of social and political discourse and the institutional context within which political power is exercised but, once over, hard for many outsiders to take seriously.

In some peculiar ways, however, the extraordinary events of the mid 1970s are already ancient history, and the Portuguese constitution and economic system are both marked by a self-conscious escape from the legacy of this period. For reasons I hope to explain in this book, contemporary Portuguese democracy rests in part on the sublimation of this conflictive experience which tends to make for a highly fragmented view of these events, and risks making the history of those years the captive of selective memories. Much that has been written about Portuguese democracy has tended to reflect a self-imposed amnesia; the story often begins in 1976 with the establishment of constitutional government. The problem with this approach is that the constitution of 1976 emerged out of the conditions of the revolutionary

period. It incorporated a rhetoric and imposed statutory limitations on economic activity that reflected a point of view then dominant, but which by the end of the decade no longer found resonance in the public or the political classes, not to mention Portugal's would-be partners within the European Community.

It is important to stress this point because there has been a tendency to homogenize the Portuguese case into a comparative framework, thus obscuring vital elements of its democratization. For those on the right, this homogenization stems from a desire to de-emphasize the history of the revolution and even to deny that it occurred. None of this is very surprising. The image of the revolution is, of course, very much part of a struggle for historical memory, a process which in itself can involve both affirmation and denial. The Portuguese Communist Party, for instance, appropriated to itself the defense of the "gains of the revolution" during the 1980s – principally the radical expropriation of the large monopolies and landholdings in 1975 and the socializing clauses in the 1976 constitution – and until 1982 they fought a rearguard action in the defense of these measures. The communists thus helped to disguise the fact (conveniently for many former radicals who had moved to the center and right) that the nationalizations and expropriations were very representative of the popular will at the time, and were prompted as much by the absence or collapse of state authority as by any preconceived or Machiavellian plot. And the communists contributed to a partial and limited view of what had occurred since they were always glad to accept credit for the very phenomena which others blamed for Portugal's problems, and some of which they had, in fact, opposed in the heat of the struggle with a popular movement often led by young firebrands to their left.

The sublimation of the revolution is also a product of the demilitarization of Portuguese politics. A key element in the political equation of 1975 was the radicalized military. Yet, over the course of the 1980s, the military radicals were marginalized both within the armed forces and in the political system. Even the "moderate" officers who had played a central role in stiffening the opposition to extremism on left and right, when increasing anarchy and institutional breakdown threatened to escalate into armed confrontation and civil war, proved too interventionist for

the new European-style democracy that developed in Portugal. After the abolition of the Council of the Revolution in 1982, the coup makers of 1974, "captains of April" as they had been named in the euphoric spring of 1974, were reduced to little more than a coterie of aging veterans. As always, it is the victors who write history and, in the case of Portugal, the victors are the civilian politicians who, with much outside encouragement and financial help, joined forces to oppose the radicalization in Portugal in the summer of 1975.

This bowdlerization of the revolution, while understandable, does have the disadvantage of obscuring some of the dynamics vital to the new regime's formation. In particular, it obscures the fact that agonizing choices were faced by the Portuguese in 1975, and thereby hides the sources of the strength of Portuguese democracy. This strength flows from the fact that it was a democracy born of struggle.

II

It is also sometimes difficult to remember, twenty years later, the importance Portuguese affairs assumed on the world stage in the mid 1970s. But this oscillation between long periods of inattention followed by short bursts of international panic is hardly a new phenomenon for Portugal. In 1640 and 1820, as in 1974, Portuguese revolutions disturbed the international status quo. The panicked reactions to them by the Count-Duke of Olivares, Prince Metternich, and Henry Kissinger respectively were surprisingly similar. And, in many ways, the Portuguese upheavals, which for a time so preoccupied these statesmen, were in the long term dwarfed by their international consequences – the collapse of the attempt to regenerate Spanish imperial power in the 1640s, the independence of Brazil in the 1820s, and the beginning of the end of white rule in southern Africa in the 1970s. Perhaps because of this peculiar historical trajectory, historians have given more attention to outcomes than to initiations. The events themselves more often than not receive barely a line of historical narrative. The failed revolt of the Catalans in 1640 is the subject of a classic work by John H. Elliott, but the successful revolt of the Portuguese in 1640 awaits its historian. The importance Metternich attributed to Portugal's revolution

of 1820 is usually passed over in two lines. The Portuguese revolution of 1974 is already dismissed by most as having been a figment of the imagination of wishful-thinking leftists, even if some participants have good reason to forget this period. Henry Kissinger's actions in the mid 1970s, for instance, did not display his finer qualities or reflect his soundest judgment and, not surprisingly, features nowhere in his lengthy book, *Diplomacy* (New York, 1994).

The contrast between short-term salience and long-term consequence is also, it should be noted, encouraged by the rhythm of Portuguese history; that is, by a certain alternation between short bursts of often precocious experimentation which are followed by long lulls. Both phases temporarily appear to exclude the possibility of the other. I distinctly remember sitting in a Lisbon café in early 1964 reading Edgar Prestage's account of Lisbon fifty years before, in which he writes of demonstrators marching in the streets and of political and military turmoil. Such a Lisbon appeared inconceivable to me at the time and I dismissed Professor Prestage's description as being that of an old man's exaggerated memories. But, only a decade later, most of the old cafés had been replaced by banks, whose employees were vociferous "antifascists" led by a communist cabinet minister, and the fastidious tidiness of 1964 was already inconceivable, just as the revolutionary upheaval of 1974–5 must seem inexplicable to students entering university twenty years later. All of this goes to show how quickly we all become antiquarians, and the closer the past is to us the further away it seems.

That does not mean, of course, that the events themselves (or even our perception of them at the time) are insignificant. The Portuguese experience was qualitatively different from many other contemporaneous regime changes, precisely because the transition in Portugal acquired many of the characteristics of a revolution. In some senses, what occurred thereafter was not only a process of establishing democracy, but a process of a revolution tamed. The Portuguese upheaval of 1974–5 did not "turn the world upside down" as the seventeenth-century English levellers put it, though for several months in 1975 Portugal recaptured much of the euphoria of revolutions past, if little of their bloodiness. In fact, it was because of this blood–free trajectory that the Portuguese revolution is not punctuated by indelible images such

as the execution of Charles I, the storming of the Bastille, or the fall of the Winter Palace, which in other historical contexts have so dramatically marked a rupture with the past. It is true, of course, that in all these cases the past in one form or another returned to haunt the new regime, and old social inequalities resurfaced in new political structures. Yet the signal event remained forever in popular imagination and historical text to proclaim the intent of radical change if not its consummation. Even failed revolutions had such moments. They have faded from historical memory only because the consequences of the events were not those anticipated, or the old order outflanked the new, returning sometimes with new clothing to suppress the fact and even the memory of potential rupture. Portugal had such moments, and one objective of this book is to record them before they suffer the ministrations of the historical amnesiologists.

The dynamic of failure and success, played out in the coalescence and disintegration of alliances during the tumultuous period between the collapse of the old order and the crystallization of the new, is not slighted here. The brief interlude of euphoria, characteristic of all revolutionary moments, when anything and everything seems possible, is the most difficult to recapture retrospectively. It was the moment Wordsworth encapsulated by his famous phrase about the French Revolution, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive"; or Marx, writing of the 1848 revolution in France, called a moment of "sparkling brilliants." This moment is invariably lost by scholars of successful revolutions, who almost always see outcomes as inevitable. And it is a moment too often suppressed by scholars of failed revolutions since they see such moments as ephemeral, even phantasmagorical.

There are certainly structural constraints in any revolution – socio-economic and psychological, as well as those growing from the international context – that set powerful limits in any given case. But the views of the actors in the drama, and their interpretations of the balance of political and social forces, remain critical for political action, even if objectively their constructions and interpretations turn out afterwards to be incorrect. Hindsight has many advantages, but its disadvantage is to rob history of any feeling for the choices men and women confront in moments of turmoil. That is probably why, despite all the theories of

revolution and the academic and ideological debates about their causes, every revolution is a shock and a surprise. Indeed, the Portuguese revolution was both a shock and a surprise.